

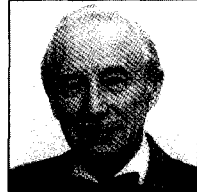
Reach the Gospel -  
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Use Words!

Haven't You Seen Enough?

## THE TIME OF OUR LIVES



BERNARD CASSERLY

**I**T was just a brief report in the "People" section of my favorite newspaper one morning, but it was enough to make me sick. (The *Star Tribune* is my favorite not just because it's the only daily in my hometown, but because I spent 10 years as a "Star reporter" there.)

The item said that *Roseanne*, the TV series, was being dropped by ABC at the end of the season "because the cost wouldn't be worth it," according to the *New York Daily News*. That cost (hold your nose) was \$2.5 million per episode!

If you've ever had the misfortune to see a segment of this vulgar sitcom, you too would feel like throwing up. To add to my indignation, the headline on the "People" section was "Guess no more: *Ellen* to come out as a lesbian." How many millions per half-hour does that show cost ABC?

When the evening's TV fare looks too bleak, my wife and I sometimes rent a video. Despite our sons' warnings, we decided a few weeks ago to lay out \$3.95 for *Fargo*, made by two brothers born and raised in Minnesota, and now reaping many best-of-the-year accolades.

I know, I know. The movie carries an R rating from the Motion Picture Association of America and an A-IV rating (adults only, with reservations) from the U.S. Catholic Conference. Despite its title, *Fargo* (in North Dakota) is about Minnesota, and it was getting so many awards and nominations, well, we were curious.

Until I saw *Fargo*, I wasn't sure what "black humor" really meant. Neither my wife nor I laughed all evening. Apparently this "black" means stupid, deadly, foul-mouthed and unrelated to real life. The actors were caricatures, not human beings.

Small-town people, in Minnesota or elsewhere, don't go to bed with their clothes, boots and furry hats on. Every other grunt is not the F-word that rhymes with muck. The bad guys run from mindless murder of the innocent to buck-naked, pony-tailed, bed-bouncing prostitution. This is Academy Award fare?

We now know how much it costs to produce one half-hour of *Roseanne*. *Fargo* was a low-budget atrocity, but it will probably rake in millions from both video and movie fans. So what can the Church do to compete with the appeal of Hollywood's growing attacks on good taste, common sense and, yes, family values?

The task seems hopeless. The Church has wrestled with it for a long time. Remember the Legion of Decency? When we stood up at Mass one Sunday a year to take the pledge against supporting bad movies and plays?

The U.S. bishops now conduct an annual collection (May 17-18 this year) to help them compete with secular

entertainment. Of the more than \$6 million collected in 1995, half was spent on nationwide media activities. The other half was kept in local dioceses for grassroots programs.

**Question:** How much will \$3 million help you take on Hollywood? **Answer:** Not quite two weeks' worth of *Roseanne*. Obviously, the bishops need a few other ideas. The February issue of *Proclaim*, the bishops' communications committee newsletter, reports what's in the works.

The committee allocated \$650,000 for the third year of TV public service announcements. It renewed financing the Catholic Communications Campaign (CCC) toll-free movie review line. The number is 1-800-311-4CCC.

The bishops funded 10 media, print, research and Internet projects, cooperating with ecumenical and interfaith bodies here and abroad. Topics include euthanasia, church attendance, sacred music, migrant ministry and the life of German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The U.S. collection will be held on World Communications Day 1997, proclaimed by Pope John Paul II. "Communicating Jesus: The Way, the Truth and the Life" is this year's theme.

The pope requested cooperation among all Christians to increase religious and spiritual media programming. "It would be a significant ecumenical achievement," he said, if Christians could cooperate more closely... in the media," as they prepare for the jubilee year 2000.

**"It is not easy to remain optimistic about the positive influence of the mass media,"** the pope said, "when they appear either to ignore the vital role of religion in people's lives, or when the treatment that religious belief receives seems consistently negative and unsympathetic."

Expressing concern about "uninvited" media images in the home, Pope John Paul said it is "particularly hard for parents to guard their children from unwholesome messages and to insure that their (children's) education... comes about in a way that is appropriate to their age and sensibility, and to their developing sense of right and wrong."

So what can we in the pew possibly do when more than half of all films rated by the bishops last year were suitable for adults only? First of all, be as generous as you can to the Communications Collection. And, unlike me, pay more attention to the movie and TV ratings, and complain when they're wrong. Your input is important. Otherwise, you could spend the evening with a good book. □

Editor emeritus of *The Catholic Spirit*, newspaper of the St. Paul and Minneapolis Archdiocese, Bernard Casserly writes on senior citizens' concerns for the Catholic press.

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In March 1996, television executives and President Clinton met in a much-publicized rapprochement between an industry and a chief executive, each of whom was eager to appear to be seizing the moral high ground. The industry was coming under increasingly heavy fire from parents fed up with onscreen sex and vio-

lence. The chief executive's motives for calling the meeting were less clear. Regardless, it was a lovefest that came in the wake of the 1996 Federal Telecommunications Act, which required new TV sets to have the so-called V-chip, the device that enables parents to block out objectionable shows.

# NEGATIVE REVIEWS

To make a complaint about a radio or television program, **Morality in Media** suggests you write the Federal Communications Commission, Mass Media Bureau, 2025 M Street NW, Room 8210, Washington, DC 20554. To complain about a cable television program, write the Federal Communications Commission, Cable Services Bureau, 1919 M Street NW, Washington, DC 20554. If a program is morally offensive but not "indecent," the best persons to make complaints to are the program's sponsors.

**Democratic Sen. Ernest F. Hollings** of South Carolina, who introduced legislation in February to require a content-based rating system, described the ratings offered by Valenti as "confusing" and "totally unresponsive" to parents' expressed wishes.

**Canada's Rating System** A rating system of the sort favored by advocacy groups is now being tested in Canada, and no one seems to have any difficulty understanding it. Shows in Canada, besides being graded as to age suitability, receive ratings on an intensity scale of 1-5 in the categories of violence, language and sex. The numbers are keyed to adjectives like "brief," "comedic," "mild" and "suggestive."

As for the alleged difficulty of rating so many shows, one has to presume that when the producers decide what age group their shows are suitable for, they do not act arbitrarily but rather do exactly what advocacy groups want them to do: **evaluate the**

**intensity of language, violence and sex. How much of a greater effort, then, would it require to let the rest of us in on their calculations?**

It is especially telling that a long-time colleague of Valenti's, Richard D. Heffner, for nearly two decades the director of the MPAA's Code and Rating Administration, parted company on this issue with his former boss. In a letter to *The New York Times*, Heffner wrote that the movie and television industries could give the public what it wants, an information-based rating system, without undue difficulty. Such a system, he said, was, in fact, tested effectively during his term as the head of the rating administration.

**The Bottom Line** Why is it that the television industry (like the movie industry before it) is so dead set against an information-based system? Think about it. If you're a producer and your show is consistently rated high in sexual content, violence or

inappropriate language, it tends to impugn your creativity. To come right out and tell the whole world that you can't get by without laying on sex and violence with a trowel is not something that most producers would like to do. It's much more palatable to tag your show as suited or not suited to a particular age group without going into embarrassing particulars.

But much more significant is the effect of the bottom line. A sponsor might not be that concerned about having its flagship product associated with a TV-14 or even TV-M program but might well think twice if the same program was frankly described as heavy on language, sex or violence or any combination thereof.

**For the sake of the bottom line,** then, Valenti and the television industry are willing to **defy the wishes** of the parents of America. For make no mistake about it, Valenti is offering to us this bland and cryptic age-based rating system on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. If the FCC ~~came~~ to weigh it in the balance and find it wanting, as it indeed should, then Valenti has promised that he will be in court in a "nanosecond," charging infringement of First Amendment rights. □

Michael Gallagher writes about media issues for this magazine.

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## CONTENT-BASED RATINGS

The NBC network's Thursday evening primetime lineup includes four consistently top-ranked sitcoms: *Friends*, *The Single Guy*, *Seinfeld* and *The Naked Truth*. On Feb. 20, each show was rated TV-PG, meaning that parental guidance was suggested because of some sexual or violent content.

During the "family friendly" 8-9 p.m. (Eastern) time slot, the shows dealt with the breakup of two of its main characters, a woman following an argument with her husband, and a man who loves someone who is unfaithful. Along the way, the fast-paced verbal exchanges between the couple and the other characters touch on sexual procreancy and, in the case of *urination*

and the unimportance of marriage. The *New York Times* TV listing for the evening synopsis the show thusly: "Ross tries to conceal a disturbing secret from Rachel."

On *The Single Guy*, the show's only married couple among a group of six twentysomething friends are adopting a child. When a 7-year-old boy instead of an infant is offered them for adoption, the couple balks, but ultimately decides to go ahead with the adoption. Don Rickles, comedian noted for insulting people, played the father of the young man who adopted. As character insulted his wife, an Asian American woman, an ethnic slur. Since jokes were directed at an African-American character, an English character and a young man believed by Rickles to be a homosexual. There were addi-

tional jokes about the male anatomy and marijuana. The TV listing described the show thusly: "Sam and Trudy finally adopt their first child."

In both instances the newspaper listing was hardly sufficient to describe the content of the shows, which, interestingly enough, had positive messages: *Friends*, about friendship, relationships and *The Single Guy*, about the need for couples to consider adopting older, hard-to-place children. One wonders whether those messages were lost to sexual innuendo and comic putdowns. One also wonders if parents, knowing the true content of these two shows on this particular evening, might not opt to keep the TV turned off and find better ways to both entertain and educate. □

Also-ABC Excisside Hudson NY Pd / ER - Mr. Jordan - why the "Fres A Condon" Ellen - poor Taste & Not a funny show - what?

Columbia 20 May 1997

Faced with the dread specter of government intervention, the lords of television duly promised to comply. So began a series of weekly meetings presided over by Jack Valenti, longtime president of the Motion Picture Association of America. Valenti and 25 others from the television industry met for the better part of a year on how best to promote the welfare of you and your children without cutting back on the TV industry's enormous profit margin.

**Understanding the New Ratings** Lo, the mountain labored and last December brought forth, if not precisely a mouse, a feeble creature with weak teeth that bears an uncanny resemblance to the movie ratings that the durable Valenti himself midwived into the world nearly 30 years ago.

What kind of system was it? Despite an overwhelming demand on the part of parents polled for a system that gives information about the content of shows, and similar requests from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the National Parent-Teacher Association among others, what Valenti and his colleagues unveiled last December and what went into operation this past January was an age-based rating system that tells parents absolutely nothing about the content of the programs rated.

It runs as follows: TV-G designates shows suitable for all audiences; TV-PG designates those with some material unsuitable for young children, such as coarse language, suggestive dialogue or limited violence; TV-14 "strongly cautions" parents to beware of sexual content, strong dialogue and more intense language that may not be appropriate for children younger than 14; TV-M designates shows designed for adults with profanity, graphic violence and explicit sex.

For children's programming there are two ratings: TV-K, designating shows suitable for all youngsters, and TV-K7, shows advised only for children 7 and above.

The ratings apply to all entertainment and children's programming but not news, sports, promotional spots and commercials. (Valenti's committee, as of this writing, is still debating which programs will be defined as "news.") The crucial judgments about age-suitability are made by the very same men and women, mostly men, who produce the programs. The ratings appear in the upper left corner of

the picture for the first 15 seconds of a show, and they're also supposed to appear in TV guides and newspaper listings.

**Rating the Ratings** As might be expected, the public reaction has been overwhelmingly negative, which, despite the immense lobbying power of the entertainment industry, might cause serious problems when it comes to gaining Federal Communications Commission approval.

**Sen. Joseph Lieberman, a Connecticut Democrat, declared that Valenti's committee had produced a "turkey" and called the age-based code "confusing and disappointing." One of Lieberman's more prominent constituents, moreover, a working mother with children ages 3 to 17, pronounced the rating system "inscrutable." Her name is Meryl Streep.**

Democratic Rep. Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts, the original sponsor of V-chip legislation, was no less harsh in his criticism. "They're saying," said the congressman at a December press conference, "that everyone should appreciate how hard they've worked to slightly redesign a 1960s system for a 1990s 100-TV-channel universe where parents are demanding more information."

Markey pointed out that the "V" in V-chip, which he had intended to signify violence, was now robbed of its meaning, since the TV industry was determined to give no clue as to why a program was assigned to a particular age category.

Markey also predicted that the PG rating would become a "blackhole into which producers will drop the majority of shows." Events have proven him a true prophet. Once the ratings went in effect in January, all but a handful of shows have been tagged PG by their producers. ~~Should we really be grateful to Valenti for this confusion for letting us know that shows like Seinfeld and Roseanne tend to contain "material unsuitable for young children"? And what good does it do parents?~~

Valenti has consistently argued that an information-based system would simply be too difficult to administer because of the vast number of shows, and besides, it would be hard to understand. Speaking before a Senate Commerce Committee in late February, Valenti again defended the rating system and claimed that content-based alternatives were excessively complex and hard for parents to use.

Beside mandating the V-chip, the telecommunications act also stipulated that the television industry devise a voluntary rating system to assist parents in making decisions as to what to exclude. If the industry failed to come up with a satisfactory system by February 1997, the law instructed the Federal Communications Commission to appoint a committee of its own to establish guidelines.